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Director's Comments

On May 8 and 9, DJJ held its first agency managers' conference in four years. On the second day, a number of representatives from other state and local youth serving agencies attended. The goal of the conference was to improve communications across the various parts of our agency, and to stress the importance of collaborating with those who partner with us in serving juveniles to better plan and work together to improve success. The meeting also served as the kick off for updating our strategic plan.



While there are always things we can learn from others, I have no doubt that DJJ is as good as, or better than, other state juvenile justice agencies when it comes to serving court involved young people. We do a lot of things very well and we have results that favorably compare with most other states. That is not to say that we should not do more. As an example, for those juveniles released from a JCC in 2002, 68.2 percent were reconvicted of a new offense within 36 months. For those placed by the courts on probation in 2002, 47 percent were reconvicted within three years. Overall, our recidivism rates are declining, but slowly. The upshot from our conference was not that we should change the agency's direction, but that it should be more focused on improving the outcomes. Our focus should be on public safety, which means that we should concentrate on strategies that reduce the chances that juveniles in our JCCs or on probation (or diverted from the court system) will commit new crimes, and create new victims. The basic question, when a young person comes to DJJ, is "what should we do to prepare him (or her) to better manage to be a decent member of the community in which he lives, or to which he will return upon release from incarceration?"

While we need to keep wards safe and productive while they are in our juvenile correctional centers, and appropriately supervised while on probation or parole, these are means to a greater end. Whether we are successful in meeting the charge given to us by the Governor and General Assembly is determined by the result – the extent to which the young people with whom we work do better when they are in their communities, at their schools, in their jobs, and as law-abiding members of our society. This is simple to say, but not easy to achieve. There are no silver bullets in our business – no one program is going to fix the many issues faced by court involved youth. I cannot tell you what to do to improve our results. You are the professionals in this business, and know more about the youth with whom you work than I do. But we will not succeed unless all the players put their heads together and develop plans in concert with one another.

Our strategic plan is being revised by a group that includes representatives of our community programs, our institutions, and our central office, both in the field and in Richmond; a member of the Department of Correctional Education is also directly involved. We need to define how we will measure and define ‘success,’ and develop strategies to carry us through the next 3 – 4 years. The measures and results will be included on a state web site, accessible by the public, as well as by legislators and advocacy groups, that has been created by the Council for Virginia’s Future. The goals and objectives that will be included in our revised strategic plan will be the basis for deciding how we will move forward over the next few years, and will influence how we measure our success, both as an agency and as individual employees of DJJ. Results will come from how we do our jobs as individuals, but will also depend upon how we work with others to get the job done. I have been in this job for one year now and am thankful for the opportunities that working with all of you provides. Thank you all for welcoming me back to DJJ and for your willingness to participate in our discussions for the future.